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DE RUEHDM #0016/01 0051444
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 051444Z JAN 09
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5760
INFO RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA PRIORITY 0007
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000016

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/RA, WHA/CCA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/04/2019
TAGS: [ETRD](#) [ETTC](#) [PGOV](#) [CU](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: SYRIA-CUBA: TITLE III OF THE LIBERTAD ACT,
DECEMBER 2008

REF: SECSTATE 126578

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4(b,d)

¶1. (C) In response to reftel, Post reports that the SARG has taken no actions in 2008 to promote the advancement of democracy or human rights in Cuba and as a matter of foreign policy has expressed support for the regime of Fidel Castro.

Cuban Ambassador Blames U.S. for Hurricane Damage

¶2. (SBU) Local Syrian media covered two public statements from Cuban Ambassador to Syria Luis Figuredo. Figuredo denounced U.S. allegations of human rights abuses in Cuba on May 20 as unfounded, and characterized the statements as part of the continuing "unjust American siege" of Cuba. In early October, the Cuban Ambassador praised Syria's support for Cuba's "struggle to maintain its sovereignty" over the past 50 years since Cuba's revolution. Figuredo blamed the 40 year-old U.S. trade embargo for "damaging" the Cuban people, and for exacerbating the effects of Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. He expressed Cuba's readiness to begin "unconditional negotiations" with the U.S., as long as such negotiations did not threaten Cuba's "sovereignty and independence." Finally, Figuredo said that Cuba is eager to develop its economic relationship with Syria to the same level as the political relationship between the two states.

High-level Diplomatic Visits

¶3. (C) A Cuban delegation led by Alfonso Frago Perez, Secretary General of the Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America (OSPAAAL), participated in the November 2008 Palestinian Right of Return conference. At the conference, Perez reiterated Cuba's support for Syria's right to regain the Golan, for the withdrawal of Israeli forces to the June 1967 borders, for the establishment of a Palestinian state, and for the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland. Expanding the limits of diplomatic hyperbole, Perez then championed Cuba and Syria's roles in defending the human rights of the world's peoples.

¶4. (C) On the margins of the Right of Return conference, Executive Secretary of the Cuban-Arab Friendship Association Gonzales (no first name given) met with Ba'ath Party Regional Command member Osama Adi. Adi expressed Syria's solidarity with the Cuban people, especially with the detainees in Guantanamo Bay, and said that Cuba's ties with Syria make both countries capable of thwarting "U.S. plots." Cuban

Gonzales issued a public statement condemning the alleged October 26 U.S. raid of an al-Qaeda safehouse in the Syrian village of Abu Kamal, saying "this criminal aggression has proved the U.S. administration's failure in realizing its plots." He also expressed solidarity with Syrian captives in Israeli prisons.

15. (SBU) Syrian Minister of Information Mohsen Bilal paid an official visit to Cuba on the margins of the Havana Trade Fair on November 3.

Participation in Trade Fairs

16. (SBU) In August 2008, Cuba participated in the 55th Damascus International Fair. The Cuban stand featured pharmaceutical and biotechnical products and a cigar roller who demonstrated how Cuban cigars are hand-rolled. Members of the Havana Scientific Complex and Cuban Chamber of Commerce met with Syrian Minister of Economy and Trade Amer Lufti.

17. (SBU) According to local media, Syria reciprocated by operating a stand at the Havana Trade Fair, although names of participating Syrian companies and businessmen were not reported. On the margins of the fair, the Cuban Director of Foreign Trade for the Middle East met with the Syrian Director of Foreign Trade with Latin America to discuss opportunities to strengthen their economic relationship.

Bilateral Trade Agreements

18. (SBU) In September 2008, Syrian Minister of Agriculture Adel Safar met with Cuban Ambassador Figuredo to review a bilateral MOU calling for cooperation in the production of veterinary pharmaceuticals and vaccines. (Comment: To date, there has been no public opening of any joint Cuban-Syrian factory for manufacturing veterinary pharmaceuticals. End comment.)
CONNELLY